



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Egypt

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the Government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion and Shari'a (Islamic law) is the primary source of legislation; religious practices that conflict with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited. Members of non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the Government generally worship without harassment and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries; however, members of religious groups that are not recognized by the Government, particularly the Baha'i Faith, experience personal and collective hardship.

There was no significant change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government opposed advances in the respect for religious freedom affecting Baha'is; there continued to be abuses and numerous restrictions, and some improvements. It appealed an April 4 decision by the Administrative Court which supported the right of Baha'i citizens to receive ID cards and birth certificates with religion noted on the documents.

In December the president decreed that permits for church repair and rebuilding, previously requiring his approval, could be granted by provincial governors. The purpose of this was to reduce delay. The central government continued to control the granting of permits for construction of new churches. Despite the 2005 decree, as well as a previous presidential decree in 1999 to facilitate approvals, many churches continued to encounter difficulty in obtaining permits.

Metwalli Ibrahim Metwalli Saleh, arrested by the State Security Intelligence Service (SSIS) in May 2003 apparently for his views on Islam, including support of the right to convert, was released on April 23 after receiving eight separate rulings from the Supreme State Security Emergency Court in his favor and an official statement from the state security prosecutor ordering his release. Saleh, age fifty-two, had been held in Al-Wadi al-Gadid Prison, near Assiut.

Tradition and some aspects of the law discriminated against religious minorities, including Christians and particularly Baha'is. The Government also continued to deny civil documents, including identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community, which numbered 500 to 2000 persons. In the past, the Government did not provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. Over the past two years, approximately thirty-two converts from Christianity to Islam, who wished to return to Christianity, have received verdicts allowing them to recover their original Christian identities. This principle, however, has not been tested in courts in the cases of citizens originally Muslim who converted to Christianity. The Government also continued to prosecute a small number of citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs and practices alleged to "insult heavenly religions."

There continued to be religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society during the period covered by this report. In October 2005 and April 2006, Alexandria witnessed sectarian strife. In the October incident, a young Muslim man, enraged by reports that some Christians had staged a play critical of Islam, attacked several Christians outside a church. Subsequent riots left three Muslims dead and resulted in significant damage to Copt (Egyptian Christian) private properties and some damage to churches. In the April incident, a man attacked Copt worshippers with a knife outside three churches in separate locations, killing one elderly Christian and wounding more than a dozen. The suspect, who had a history of mental illness, was immediately apprehended by the security forces. Subsequent communal violence, and the response by the security forces, injured dozens of protestors from both sides. A parliamentary panel had not formally visited Alexandria and had not completed its investigation of this incident by the end of the period covered by this report.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador, senior administration officials, and members of congress continued to raise U.S. concerns about religious discrimination with senior government officials.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 370,308 square miles, and its population, as of June 2006, was approximately 73.7 million, of whom almost 90 percent were estimated to be Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims constituted less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates of the percentage of Christians in the population ranged from 8 percent to 15 percent, or between 6 to 11 million, the majority of whom belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Other Christian communities included the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian Catholic), Maronite, and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) churches. An evangelical Protestant church, established in the middle of the nineteenth century, included sixteen Protestant denominations. There also were followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was granted legal status

in the 1960s. There were small numbers of Mormons and members of Jehovah's Witnesses, but the Government does not recognize either group. The non-Muslim, non-Coptic Orthodox communities ranged in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. The number of Baha'is was estimated at between 500 and 2 thousand persons. The Jewish community numbered fewer than 200 persons.

Christians were dispersed throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians tended to be higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

There were many foreign religious groups, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants who have had a presence in the country for almost a century. These groups engaged in education, social, and development work. The Government generally tolerated these groups if they did not proselytize. However, the Government over the past several years refused reentry into the country of individuals suspected of proselytizing. In September 2005 an American Christian missionary who had previously resided in the country reported that he had been refused entry. In November 2005 press reports indicated that the Government deported a Korean Christian missionary.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution, under Article 46, provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites; however, the Government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and Shari'a is the primary source of legislation; religious practices that conflict with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited. Members of the non-Muslim religious minorities generally worship without legal harassment and may maintain links with coreligionists in other countries. Members of other religious groups that are not recognized by the Government, particularly the Baha'i Faith, continue to experience personal and collective hardship.

For a religious group to be officially recognized it must submit a request to the Religious Affairs Department within the Ministry of Interior, which determines whether the group would, in its view, pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The Religious Affairs Department also consults the leading religious figures in the country, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president, who issues a decree recognizing the new group, according to Law 15 of 1927. If a religious group bypasses the official registration process, participants are subject to detention and could also face prosecution and punishment under Article 98(F) of the Penal Code, which forbids the "ridiculing of a heavenly religion." The Government last recognized a new religious group--First Bible Baptist Folk--in 1990.

During the year, Jehovah's Witnesses engaged the Government on their legal registration. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in the country since 1960, despite a presence dating to the 1930s and legal registration in Cairo in 1951 and Alexandria in 1956. The Government's opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses was based on opposition from the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has condemned the Jehovah's Witnesses as heretical, as well as Nasser-era concerns about links to Israel. A 1964 Arab League decree labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses as Zionists. Since 1960, Jehovah's Witnesses have reported varying degrees of harassment and surveillance by Government agents. In February and May 2006 representatives from the Jehovah's Witnesses New York headquarters, accompanied by European colleagues, visited the country for meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Council for Human Rights, the Arab League, and others. The delegation reported that, as a result of its visit, they believed that harassment and hostile surveillance of the group had ceased, but progress on registration was not realized. Previously, in June 2005, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that one of their members was detained for five days and assaulted by State Security agents.

The Government continued to encourage interfaith dialogue. The religious establishment of Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs) engaged in interfaith discussions, both domestically and abroad. In 2004 the Government announced the formation of the quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), on which five of the twenty-five appointed members, as well as the president, are Copts. The NCHR is charged with furthering protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements. The council gave only superficial attention to the issue of religious freedom in its first annual report. In its second report, released in March, the council called for a solution for official recognition of Baha'is; addressed the problem of Jehovah's Witnesses; and criticized religious textbooks in schools for failing to address human rights topics. The report also recommended that Parliament pass a law that would facilitate the construction of new places of worship for all religious groups. Finally, the report noted that the council had not received any response from the Ministry of Interior or several governorates to its nine inquiries related to numerous complaints of alleged violations of religious freedom that it had received.

The following holy days are designated national holidays: Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic new year, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Coptic Christmas (January 7).

### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

All mosques must be licensed. The Government appoints and pays the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques and monitors their sermons. It does not contribute to the funding of Christian churches. The minister of awqaf reported that there were 74,500 free-standing mosques and 18,000 mosques located in private buildings. The Government annexes new mosques every year, but cannot keep pace with new mosque construction. A February 2004 decree from the minister of awqaf removed the authority to issue permits to build mosques from governors and also placed mosques in private homes under awqaf administrative control.

The contemporary interpretation of the 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni decree, partially still in force, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues. In addition, Ministry of Interior regulations, issued in 1934 under the Al-Ezabi decree, specify a set of ten conditions that the Government must consider before a presidential decree for construction of a new non-Muslim place of

worship can be issued. The conditions include the requirement that the distance between a church and a mosque not be less than one hundred meters and that the approval of the neighboring Muslim community be obtained.

In an April 2005 broadcast on national television, President Hosni Mubarak stated that the problem of issuing permits to build churches had been addressed by the Government and that all citizens are treated equally. However, in practice, many churches face difficulty in obtaining permits from provincial officials. Although President Mubarak reportedly has approved all requests for permits presented to him, Interior Ministry delays--in some instances indefinitely--cause many requests to reach the President slowly or not at all. Some churches have complained that local security officials have blocked church repairs or improvements even when a permit has been issued. Others suggest unequal enforcement of the regulations pertaining to church and mosque projects.

In March 2004 the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that the constitution required Christian and Muslim endowments be treated under an equal standard and that Christian endowments, like Muslim endowments, could not be sued. However, this "equal treatment" ruling has not been extended to legal cases relative to the construction and repair of churches.

In November 2005 a presidential decree was issued to build a new church in al-Rehab City, a large, new development on the outskirts of Cairo with a population of approximately 80 thousand. Church officials applied for the decree in 2001; construction is scheduled to be completed in early 2007. The first mass was held at the construction site on June 2, 2005. Presidential decrees to build new churches were also issued for the newly constructed cities of Sheikh Zaied, Tenth of Ramadan, New Cairo, New Assuit, and New Minya during the year.

In March 2006 Pope Shenouda III, accompanied by the governor of Aswan and forty church officials, formally opened a new cathedral in the Upper Egypt governorate of Aswan. Six years in construction, the new cathedral cost \$ 2.09 million (12 million Egyptian pounds) and holds 6 thousand worshippers.

According to statistics published by the Government's Official Gazette, sixty-three Presidential decrees were issued from June 30, 2005, through July 1, 2006, for church-related construction, compared with twelve permits reported during the previous period. Of the sixty-three decrees, twenty-one were issued for construction of new churches (fourteen Orthodox, two Protestant, two Catholic), community service buildings (two Orthodox), and one hospital (Catholic); twenty to grant official status to existing churches (eleven Orthodox, seven Protestant, two Catholic); twenty to rebuild or reconstruct existing churches (eight Orthodox, eight Protestant), a community service building (Orthodox) and monasteries (three Orthodox); and two for general maintenance or repairs of existing churches (both Protestant).

The approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by lengthy delays often measured in years. In at least three locales during the reporting period (Mankateen, Minya Governorate; Ezzbet Wasef, Giza Governorate; and Odayysat, Luxor), objections by Muslim citizens to churches that were operating without official government approval led to sectarian clashes.

In early December 2005 President Mubarak issued Decree 291/2005, which delegated authority to the country's twenty-seven governors to grant permits to Christian denominations that seek to expand or rebuild existing churches. The decree also stated that churches could undertake basic repairs and maintenance subject only to the provision of written notification to the local authorities. Decree 291 noted that the governors must examine all applications for rebuilding or expansion, which must be supported by unspecified supporting documents, within thirty days of submission. According to the new decree, "permits may not be refused except with a justified ruling." Decree 291 also cancelled a 1999 decree aimed at improving the permit process for church repair. (Presidential Decree 453 of 1999 had made the repair of all places of worship subject to a 1976 civil construction code. Although this decree made mosque and church repairs technically subject to the same laws, authorities enforced the laws more strictly for churches than for mosques.)

Six months after the promulgation of Decree 291/2005, church and lay leaders have complained, privately and publicly, that the permit process remains susceptible to delay by local officials. They have further charged that some local authorities refused to process applications without certain "supporting documents" that were virtually impossible to obtain (e.g., a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church which had been established during the country's monarchical era). Others complain that some local authorities categorize routine repairs and maintenance (e.g., painting of walls and plumbing repairs) as expansion/reconstruction projects, thus requiring formal permits versus simple notification. They also maintain that security forces blocked them from using permits that had been issued and at times denied them permits for repairs to church buildings and the supply of water and electricity to existing church facilities. Incidents of blocked or delayed permits varied, often depending on the attitude of local security officials and the governorate leadership toward the church, and on their personal relationships with representatives of the Christian churches. As a result, congregations have experienced lengthy delays--lasting for years in many cases--while waiting for new church building permits to be issued.

At the unlicensed Evangelical Church in Maadi, police reportedly halted a reconstruction project in November 2004 and prevented church members from entering the church. For fifty years the church has been unable to obtain a licensing permit.

The Assiut bishopric has been waiting for local officials to issue a building permit for a new church in the governorate's Arbadeen District, despite a 1997 order from the president and approval from the Ministry of Interior to issue the decree. Assiut's El Hamra District and Burg al Arab, Alexandria Governorate, have been waiting since 1997 and 1988, respectively. The Brothers denomination, also in Assiut Governorate, received a permit to build a church in 2001, but local police stopped construction of the building's foundation.

After eighteen years St. George Church in Dafesh, a majority Christian community near Assiut, Upper Egypt, obtained approval from the local governor in 2000 to build a new church to replace the original building, which had become too small to accommodate the growing community. Shortly after construction began in 2000 the new site was vandalized. The Government halted construction, ostensibly because the church had only obtained local approval and not the presidential decree required to build a new church. Construction remained halted at the end of the period covered by this report. The congregation continued to worship at the older site.

In 1999 the governor of Assiut issued a decree to St. John the Baptist at Awlad Elias in Sadfa, near Assiut, stating that the Orthodox church was given license to effect several remodeling projects and restoration projects. In 2001, however, Sadfa police halted repairs, because authorities believed that the church would enlarge its size by extending the building into the churchyard. After negotiations with State Security, the church received permission to demolish a wall to extend its size. However, after the newspaper Watani published an article exposing this issue and the outcome, State Security officials halted construction a second time. As of the end of June 2005, construction had not resumed, and the church was still waiting for the MOI to permit resumption of repairs. The congregation was forced to build a tent in the small church courtyard to conduct prayers.

Despite governorate level approval in 2001 for restorations to the Mar Guirguis Church in Sahel Salim, Assiut, local authorities blocked work on the church on a variety of pretexts until a presidential decree in June 2005 paved the way for the complete rebuilding of the church.

In Ezbet al-Nakhl, East Cairo, Coptic leaders of the Church of the Archangel Mikhail received permission from the Ministry of Interior in 1996, ratified by the Governor of Cairo in 2001, to expand the church to accommodate its growing congregation. However, local authorities in the district of al-Marg refused to accept the request to expand the church without a presidential decree, which was required for the renovation. The church, which had originally sought a presidential decree in 1987, had not been able to obtain one, and the project remained frozen at the end of the period covered by this report. Government officials asserted that the project was frozen because church officials did not employ the proper procedures while seeking a presidential decree, therefore making it illegal to renovate the church.

Local authorities have also closed down unlicensed buildings used as places of worship. In May 2005 State Security officials threatened to demolish the Apostolic Church in Abowan, Minya, which has operated without a government permit since 1984, on the grounds that it was structurally unsound. Nonetheless, the church continued to operate during the reporting period. As a result of restrictions, some communities use private buildings and apartments for religious services or build without permits.

In April 2005 unknown arsonists burned down an unlicensed church hall in Baghour village, Menoufiya Governorate. Nine Coptic Christians received minor injuries. The local governor supported rebuilding the facility.

In January 2006 there were sectarian clashes in the settlement of Udayssat, near Luxor. On January 17 Christians conducted Epiphany services in a building that has intermittently served as an unlicensed church since 1971. On January 18 several hundred Muslim residents of the area surrounded the building, vandalized the property, and attempted to set it ablaze. In the ensuing melee, approximately a dozen persons, both Christian and Muslim, were injured, along with several policemen. On January 20 assailants killed a forty-seven-year-old Christian farmer, Kamal Shaker Megalaa, as he returned from his fields. The Luxor district attorney ordered the arrest and investigation of several Muslims from Udayssat on suspicion of involvement in his murder.

In late October 2005 SSIS in Alexandria arrested and detained without charge for several weeks a twenty-one-year-old Alexandria law student, Abdul Karim Nabil Soliman, apparently because his Internet Web log ("blog") carried strongly worded attacks against Islam, the Government, and the president. Soliman was released without charge.

The Government continued to try citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs. In March 2005 the Maadi misdemeanor court issued a verdict in a blasphemy case involving Ibrahim Ahmad Abu Shusha and eleven of his followers, who had been detained absent an arrest warrant since July 2004. The court sentenced Abu Shusha to a prison term of three years for claiming to be divine and ridiculing a heavenly religion, namely Islam. The court sentenced the eleven other defendants (including three women, two of whom are Abu Shusha's wives) to one year imprisonment and ordered the confiscation of the leaflets and writings that propagated the group's ideology. In its reasoning, the court stated that there was sufficient evidence that Abu Shusha embraced beliefs that are contrary to and derogatory of Islam, and that he tried to propagate those beliefs by attempting to show that he possessed divine powers. The court also asserted that freedom of belief does not comprise permission to deny the principles of heavenly religions. An appeals court reaffirmed the Abu Shusha sentences on July 16, 2005. At the end of the reporting period, Abu Shusha's lawyers were seeking to appeal his case to the Court of Cassation, the nation's highest court.

On July 6, 2005 the Administrative Judiciary Court in Alexandria annulled a decree issued by the minister of information that had banned the appearance of veiled anchorwomen in television programs. The court established that the Ministry of Information's decree violated Article 47 of the constitution, which provides for freedom of religion.

The Egyptian Parties Law 40 of 1977 states that political parties based on religion are illegal. Pursuant to this law, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is an illegal organization. Muslim Brothers speak openly and publicly about their views and have recently been identifying themselves publicly as members of the organization, although they remain subject to arbitrary treatment and pressure from the Government. During the period covered by this report, hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested and charged with membership in an illegal organization, planning to revive the activities of the banned group, possessing anti-government leaflets, obstructing the constitution and the law of the country, and organizing demonstrations without obtaining prior security permission. Authorities prevented several other members from traveling abroad. Authorities arrested Essam El-Erian in May 2005 after he indicated that he was planning to run for president. El-Erian was released in October, but detained again in May. He and dozens of other MB members remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

Eighty-eight independent candidates backed by the Muslim Brotherhood were elected to the People's Assembly in the 2005 parliamentary elections, held between November 9 and December 7, despite government-sponsored efforts to stop them. Government actions included limiting access to polling stations, detentions, and government-sponsored violence. There were also credible allegations of ballot tampering and fraud. Many of the MB-affiliated candidates ran openly under the slogan "Islam is the solution," and displayed the MB insignia on their campaign materials. Despite the relative freedom allowed to candidates during the initial stages of the elections, after striking gains by MB candidates in the first round, security forces restricted access to certain polling stations in hotly contested races and killed at least eleven citizens in related civil disturbances.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of authors facing trial or charges related to writings or statements considered heretical during the reporting period.

Various ministries are legally authorized to ban or confiscate books and other works of art upon obtaining a court order. The Council of Ministers may order the banning of works that it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) at Al-Azhar University has legal authority to censor and, as of June 2004, confiscate, all publications dealing with the Qur'an and the authoritative Islamic traditions (Hadith). In recent years, the IRC has passed judgment on the suitability of nonreligious books and artistic productions, and there were several new cases of confiscation during the period covered by this report. Al-Azhar has the legal right to recommend confiscation, but the actual act of confiscation requires a court order.

The law authorizes various ministries to ban or confiscate books and other works of art upon obtaining a court order. In 2003, the Ministry of Justice issued a decree authorizing Al-Azhar sheikhs to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law. There were no court-ordered book confiscations during the year, but the Government permitted greater confiscatory authority to Al-Azhar University and acted on its recommendations.

In October 2005 the Government enforced a ban, formally recommended by the IRC, of *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, by Natana De Long-Bas, published by the American University in Cairo (AUC) Press. On October 8 the Government informed AUC that all one thousand copies, held at Port Said, would be impounded because the book contained "information not in accordance with the principles of Islam." On December 22 the Government advised AUC Press that it had reversed this decision and would allow importation of the book.

In June 2006 the Ministry of Culture's Department of Artistic Censorship banned the film *The Da Vinci Code* as well as the English and Arabic versions of the novel. Police also confiscated two thousand copies of a pirated DVD version of the film and arrested the owner of a local production company. Both the Arabic and English language versions of the novel had been sold in the country since 2003.

The local media, including state television and newspapers gives prominence to Islamic programming. Christian television programs are aired weekly on state-owned Nile Cultural TV. The weekly religion page of the prominent daily al-Ahram often reports on conversions to Islam and states that converts improved their lives and found peace and moral stability.

Pope Shenouda III has banned Coptic travel to Jerusalem since the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979. However, press reports indicated that an estimated 735 Egyptian Copts visited Israel in 2004 for pilgrimage, citing Israeli Interior Ministry statistics. There were no statistics available for subsequent periods.

The Government continued to deny civil documents, including ID cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community. The Government appealed an April 4, 2006 decision by the Administrative Court which supported the right of Baha'i citizens to receive ID cards and birth certificates with religion noted on the documents. On June 19, the Administrative Court postponed the appeal hearing to September 16.

Law 263 of 1960, still in force, bans Baha'i institutions and community activities, and a 1961 presidential decree stripped Baha'is of legal recognition. During the Nasser era, the Government confiscated all Baha'i community properties, including Baha'i centers, libraries, and cemeteries. The Government has asserted that national identity cards require all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews. The Ministry of Interior has reportedly, on rare occasions, issued documents that list a citizen's religion as "other" or simply do not include mention of religion. But it is not clear when these conditions apply. Baha'is and other religious groups that are not associated with any of the three "heavenly religions" have been compelled either to misrepresent themselves or go without valid identity documents.

Those without valid identity cards encounter difficulty registering their children in school, opening bank accounts, and establishing businesses. Baha'is at age sixteen face additional problems under Law 143/1994, which makes it mandatory for all citizens to obtain a new identification card featuring a new national identification number. Police, often on public buses, conduct random inspections of identity papers, and those found without their identity card are regularly detained until the document is provided to the police. Some Baha'is without identity cards frequently stay home to avoid police scrutiny and possible arrest.

In May 2004 the Government confiscated the identity cards of two Baha'is who were applying for passports. Officials told them that they were acting on instructions from the MOI to confiscate any identity cards belonging to Baha'is.

In 1997 a human rights activist filed a lawsuit seeking the removal of the religious affiliation category from government identification cards. The plaintiff challenged the constitutionality of a 1994 decree by the MOI governing the issuance of new identification cards. A hearing scheduled for February 25, 2005, never took place. The court informed the attorney for the plaintiff that the case documents had been withdrawn and forwarded to the president of the State's Council, a highly unusual procedure. In December the court dismissed the appeal on a technicality, arguing that the complainant failed to file the appeal within sixty days after the decree had been published in the Government's Official Gazette in 1995.

Lack of formal legal recognition also concerns the membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, in Cairo. The LDS Church has maintained an organized congregation in the country for more than thirty years. The Government has raised no objection. Some members, particularly those who have converted to the LDS Church overseas and then returned to the country, complain of excessive surveillance from State Security and sometimes avoid meetings from fear of harassment.

The constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed, and, in general, the Government upholds these constitutional protections; however, government discrimination against non-Muslims exists. There are no

Christians serving as presidents or deans of public universities, and they are rarely nominated by the Government to run in elections as National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates. For the first time in more than thirty years, a Copt was appointed one of the country's twenty-six governors, in Qena. As of June 30, there were six Christians (five appointed, one elected) in the 454-seat People's Assembly; six Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; and two Christians in the 32-member cabinet. Christians, who represented between 8 and 15 percent of the population, held less than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council.

Government practices discriminated against Christians in hiring for the public sector, staff appointments to public universities, payment of Muslim imams through public funds and barring Christians from study at Al-Azhar University (a publicly funded institution). There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. In general public university training programs for Arabic language teachers bar non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Qur'an. In fall 2005 Christian student Christine Zaher successfully completed the requirements for a master's degree in Arabic from the Suez Canal University in Port Said and secured a teaching position at the same university. Prior to her graduation, there had been no reports of Christian graduates in Arabic language since 2001; she was the first Copt appointed to a university level Arabic language teaching position in several decades.

In February 2006 Dr. Salem Salaam, chairman of the pediatrics department at Minya University, resigned to protest the university's decision not to hire a medical resident onto the faculty of the university, based on the resident's Christian faith.

On May 7 President Mubarak appointed seven new judges to the Supreme Constitutional Court, including Tamer Remon Iskandar, a Copt.

In January 2005 and January 2006 Jewish pilgrims again celebrated the Abu Hasira festival. In 2004 the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court's 2001 decision to ban the annual festival at the tomb of Rabbi Abu Hasira in a village in the Nile Delta and rejected the Ministry of Culture's designation of the site as a protected antiquity. The 2001 decision linked the status of the site and the festival to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the celebration was not held during the period 2002-2004.

The application of family law, including marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, and burial, is based on an individual's religion. In the practice of family law, the Government recognizes only the three "heavenly religions:" Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Muslim families are subject to Shari'a, Christian families to canon law, and Jewish families to Jewish law. In cases of family law disputes involving a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, the courts apply Shari'a. The Government does not recognize the marriages of citizens adhering to faiths other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Under Shari'a, as practiced in the country, non-Muslim males must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, but non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men.

Inheritance laws for all citizens are based on the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights, but may be provided for in testamentary documents.

Under Shari'a converts from Islam lose all rights of inheritance; however, because the Government offers no legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, inheritance rights may appear not to have been lost.

The law provides for *khul'* divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent, provided that she is willing to forego all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits. In practice some judges have applied the law in such a manner as to cause lengthy bureaucratic delays for the thousands of women who have filed for *khul'* divorce. Many women have complained that after being granted *khul'*, the required child alimony is not paid.

The Coptic Orthodox Church excommunicates women members who marry Muslim men and requires that other Christians convert to Coptic Orthodoxy to marry a member of the church. Coptic males are prevented from marrying Muslim women by both civil and religious laws. A civil marriage abroad is an option should a Christian male and a Muslim female citizen decide to marry; however, their marriage would not be legally recognized in the country. Additionally, the woman could be arrested and charged with apostasy, and any children from such a marriage could be taken and assigned to the physical custody of a male Muslim guardian, as determined by the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. The Coptic Orthodox Church permits divorce only in specific circumstances, such as adultery or conversion of one spouse to another religion.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Center issued a legal opinion in December 2003 condemning Baha'is as apostates. In May 2006 the minister of justice requested guidance from the IRC in preparation for the Government's appeal against the landmark April 4 case in support of Baha'i rights. The IRC issued an Islamic legal interpretation stating that the Baha'i Faith was a "heresy." The 2006 interpretation referenced a 1985 opinion that had accused Baha'is of working in support of Zionism and imperialism, and labeled them as "apostates."

The Government at times prosecutes members of religious groups whose practices are deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs, and whose activities are alleged to jeopardize communal harmony. Shi'ite Muslim Mohamed Ramadan Hussein El-Derini, arrested in 2004 apparently due to his affiliation with Shi'a Islam, was released in June 2005, after having spent fifteen months in administrative detention without charge or trial. There were credible reports that members of the State Security Intelligence Service (SSIS) repeatedly tortured and mistreated Derini while he was in custody.

In May 2003 the SSIS arrested Metwalli Ibrahim Metwalli Saleh, apparently because of his views on Islam. After eight separate rulings from the Supreme State Security Emergency Court ordering his release, Saleh who had been in detention in Al-Wadi al-Gadid Prison, near Assiut,

was released on April 23, 2006.

Neither the constitution nor the Civil and Penal Codes prohibit proselytizing, but police have harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.

While there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police harassed converts from Islam to Christianity. In April 2005, the authorities detained Baha Al-Accad, a citizen who was born Muslim but who was reported to have converted to Christianity. Al-Accad remained in detention at Tora Prison, south of Cairo, at the end of the reporting period, apparently under investigation for "denigrating a heavenly religion." The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity. One of these converts also reported that officers from the security service pressured him to serve as an informant.

The law prescribes administrative steps pursuant to the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. The minor children of converts to Islam, and in some cases adult children, may automatically become classified as Muslims in the eyes of the Government irrespective of the religion of the other spouse. This practice is in accordance with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a, which dictates "no jurisdiction of a non-Muslim over a Muslim."

In April 2004 an administrative court issued a verdict allowing Mona Makram Gibran, who had converted to Islam and later converted back to Christianity, to recover her original (Christian) name and identity. Some legal observers hoped the case would constitute a significant precedent as the Government has generally refused to acknowledge citizens' conversions from Islam to Christianity. The court's written verdict noted "...the Constitution guarantees equality among citizens ...without any discrimination based on race, sex, language, or faith. The Government also guarantees freedom of thought and religious faith in accordance with Article 46 of the constitution...[The State] is legally committed to register the woman's real religion and is not allowed under any circumstance to use its assigned powers to force the woman to remain Muslim." As of late June 2006, there were 148 other cases involving individuals who converted to Islam and then back to Christianity, who were attempting to recover their original Christian identities. Of these 148 individuals, 32 have received verdicts allowing them to recover their Christian identities and many of them have done so. The Government has not appealed any of these cases.

In contrast to the above-mentioned cases, the Government has not recognized conversions of individuals originally Muslim to Christianity or other religions, and resistance to such conversions by local officials has constituted a prohibition in practice. In the absence of a legal means to register their change in religious status, some converts resorted to soliciting illicit identity papers, often by submitting fraudulent supporting documents or bribing the government clerks who process the documents. In such cases, authorities periodically charged converts with violating laws prohibiting the falsification of documents.

Under Shari'a as interpreted by the Government, a non-Muslim wife who converts to Islam must divorce her "apostate," non-Muslim husband. Upon the wife's conversion, local security authorities ask the non-Muslim husband if he is willing to convert to Islam; if he chooses not to, divorce proceedings begin immediately. Custody of children is then awarded to the mother, following her conversion to Islam and the required divorce from her husband.

In April 2005 the Family Court granted the divorce of Wafaa Riffat Adly, a Christian woman who had converted to Islam, from her Christian husband, Said Farouk Adly, after he refused to convert.

An estimated several thousand persons were imprisoned because of alleged support for or membership in Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the Government. The Government stated that these persons were in detention because of membership in or activities on behalf of violent extremist groups, without regard to their religious affiliation. Internal security services monitor groups and individuals suspected of involvement in or planning for extremist activity. Internal security agencies regularly detain such persons, and the state of emergency allows them to renew periods of administrative detention ad infinitum.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion carried out by the Government; however, there were again reports of forced conversions of Coptic women and girls to Islam by Muslim men. Reports of such cases are disputed and often include inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. Observers, including human rights groups, find it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involve a female Copt who converts to Islam when she marries a Muslim male. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media.

During the reporting period, a Christian woman, Wafaa Constantin, whose alleged conversion to Islam in December 2004 had sparked significant protests in Cairo, remained in seclusion in a Coptic church facility.

There are reports in these cases of government authorities failing to uphold the law. Local authorities sometimes allow custody of a minor (age sixteen to twenty-one) Christian female who "converts" to Islam to be transferred to a Muslim custodian, who is likely to grant approval for an underage marriage. Some Coptic activists maintain that government officials do not respond effectively to instances of alleged kidnapping. In cases of marriage between an underage Christian girl and a Muslim man, there have been credible reports that government authorities have failed to cooperate with Christian families seeking to regain custody of their daughters.

According to the Instructions of the Notary Public, which implement Law 114 of 1947, persons age sixteen and above may convert to Islam without parental consent. Ignorance of the law and social pressure, including the centrality of marriage to a woman's identity, often affect a girl's decision to convert. Family conflict and financial pressure also are cited as factors.



There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who may have been abducted or illegally removed from the United States.

#### Anti-Semitism

The country's small Jewish community numbers approximately 200, most of them senior citizens. Anti-Semitic sentiments appeared in both the government-owned and opposition press; however, there have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years. Anti-Semitic articles and opinion pieces appeared in the print media, and editorial cartoons appeared in the press and electronic media. For example, the satellite-broadcast Nile Culture TV on November 27 2005 broadcast a program entitled "A Study of Israel's History" wherein a narrator said that Jews "extorted the world by exaggerating what was done to them in World War II, and they are still benefiting from this extortion, in the form of money and aid, from countries that still have a guilt complex regarding Hitler's crematoria--for which there is no proof, except for the Zionists' propaganda." The program also presented the views of journalist Mohammad Al-Qudussi, who said, "in the six years or so of World War II, it is not possible that six million Jews could have been burnt."

On December 12, 2005, columnist Hisham Abd Al-Rauf, in an article entitled "Israel's Lies" in the government-owned, limited-circulation evening newspaper *Al-Masaa*, asserted that Nazi gas chambers "were no more than rooms for disinfecting clothing." Addressing Western governments Abd Al-Rauf asked, "If you feel sorry of [sic] the poor Jews, why don't you establish their country on your lands?" The Government has urged journalists and cartoonists to avoid anti-Semitic commentary. Government officials insist that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, there are relatively few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, the Government took several steps to encourage religious freedom and tolerance. In November 2005 the NCHR announced the formation of a "Citizenship Committee," with a focus on religious freedom issues. In the aftermath of the October 2005 sectarian violence in Alexandria, the NCHR and a collection of human rights groups held a symposium in Alexandria and called for the Government to pass a unified law for all religious groups governing the construction and repair of houses of worship.

President Mubarak's Decree 291 of 2005 devolved authority for renovation and re-construction of churches from the president to the country's twenty-six governors. Observers welcomed this step as a major improvement, but some churches have continued to face delays in the issuance of permits.

Al-Azhar maintained a schedule of interfaith discussions inside the country and abroad. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Tantawi, a government appointee, and Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda participated in joint public events.

In March 2006 the NCHR released its second annual report, in which it recommended a solution for official recognition of Baha'is, addressed the problem of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country, and criticized religious textbooks in schools for failing to address human rights topics. The report also encouraged the Government to pass a law for all religious groups addressing the construction of new places of worship.

A prominent Coptic nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), continued its program of interreligious dialogue in cooperation with the Ministry of Islamic Religious Endowments. The program encouraged interaction between young Muslim and Christian religious leaders and included a major conference on citizenship and education, as well as a series of workshops, training courses, and seminars throughout the reporting period.

During the period covered by this report, the Government continued to take steps to contain incidents of sectarian violence, including those of October 2005 and April 2006 in Alexandria.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Muslim and Christian citizens share a common history and national identity. They also share the same ethnicity, race, culture, and language. Christians are geographically dispersed throughout the country, and Christians and Muslims live as neighbors. However, at times religious tensions have arisen and individual acts of prejudice and violence occur.

On August 20, 2005, the Marg district of Cairo witnessed sectarian tensions after worshippers at a church adjacent to a mosque protested the ownership of the small strip of land separating the buildings. The security services intervened to disperse a crowd of several thousand protestors. Local officials brokered a deal whereby the church received compensation for the disputed land, along with a permit to expand its building.

In October 2005 Muslims protested an earlier production at the Mar Guirguis Church of a theatrical presentation that purportedly blasphemed Islam. There were also reports that the play had been recorded on DVD. On October 19, a lone Muslim man assaulted a novitiate and a lay worker at the church. On October 21, after Friday Islamic prayers, a large crowd, variously estimated between 1 thousand and 3 thousand persons, gathered outside the church. After some in the crowd threatened the church, security forces used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. Three Muslim protesters died in the ensuing violence. No one had been brought to trial by the end of the period covered by this report.

In Kafr Salama village, Sharqiya governorate, a December 10 2005 altercation between a Muslim and a Christian resulted in the death of the Muslim. Muslim villagers later attacked the Abu Sifin Church and several Christian homes, and looted several shops before the authorities



restored order.

In April 2006 as the Coptic Orthodox community prepared to celebrate Palm Sunday, Mahmud Salaheddin Abdul Razzak, a Muslim man, carried out sequential knife attacks at three Alexandria churches, which resulted in the death of seventy-eight-year-old Noshi Atta Guirgis and injuries to more than a dozen other Christians. The police quickly arrested the twenty-five-year-old Razzak, who had a history of mental illness, and charged him in the murder and assaults. A government fact-finding committee from the People's Assembly, headed by Deputy PA Speaker Dr. Zainab Radwan and including MPs Georget Qellini and Edward El-Dahabi, had not formally visited Alexandria or released its findings by the end of the reporting period.

At Guirgis's funeral on April 15, and again on April 16, Christian and Muslim protestors clashed in riots that resulted in the death of at least one Muslim, dozens of injuries, significant damage to property belonging primarily to Copts, and some damage to churches.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is an important part of the bilateral dialogue. The right of religious freedom has been raised with senior government officials by all levels of the U.S. government, including by visiting members of congress, the secretary of state, assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, the ambassador, and other Embassy officials. The embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The embassy also discusses religious freedom issues regularly in contacts with other government officials, including governors and members of parliament. The ambassador has made public statements supporting interfaith understanding and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. Specifically, the embassy has raised its concerns about official discrimination against Baha'is with the Government. The Government insists that religious identification on national identity cards is necessary to determine which laws apply in civil cases.

The embassy maintains an active dialogue with leaders of the Christian and Muslim religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. The embassy investigates every complaint of official religious discrimination brought to its attention. It also discusses religious freedom with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside of the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenge anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and other journalists.

U.S. programs and activities support initiatives in several areas directly related to religious freedom, including funding for CEOSS programs that work with Coptic community groups in Upper Egypt.

The U.S. government is working to strengthen civil society, supporting secular channels and the broadening of a civic culture that promote religious tolerance. The U.S. embassy supports projects that promote tolerance and mutual respect between members of different religious communities.

The embassy supports the development of materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curriculums.

The U.S. government developed a version of the television program *Sesame Street* designed to reach remote households that has as one of its goals the promotion of tolerance, including among different religious groups. According to a recent household survey, the program, begun in 2000, is reaching more than 90 percent of elementary school-aged children.

The embassy is also working with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

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